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Invisible Territories

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BFA in Studio Art, concentration in Painting

Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract

Layering geography, space and time, my work urges viewers to embrace the equivocal and create a desire for the impossible. To explore this notion, *Invisible Territories* is an analysis of my practice, examining how I mediate specific references into abstract and universal interpretations. My work employs subjects that document the world by analyzing the layers and simulacra that form our visual information; focusing on the intervals between “things” as the subject matter themselves. Looking to the words of Italo Calvino as a conceptual guide, this paper discusses the practice of mapping through drawing, etching and painting.

We often find ourselves caught in patterns of experiences and expectations that lead to a blur of passivity. We take what is predicted as fact, without questioning the presumed outcome. At some point, we stop testing the boundaries that are between what is perceived and what is seen. To parse visual communication, we use frames to distill the information. However, the frame within which we view our world presents skewed understandings of what really surrounds us. This removal from context offers meaning. In the same way, our understanding of image tends to be void of the peripheral. The image purports to a representation of reality; a stagnate truth amidst the movement that surrounds it. But in reality, the image is both a record and a continuous being. It stands as an artifact in flux, in this understanding it is limitless.

I challenge viewers to find where they stand between their personal reality and the image of reality. To explore this notion, my work employs subjects that document the world by analyzing the layers and simulacra that form our visual information; focusing on the intervals between “things” as the subject matter themselves. I begin every piece with a specific reference and use the information as a guide that loses specificity as the piece progresses. The foundation of ambiguity is an invitation for the viewer to insert their personal experience and context into the abstracted nature of the work. Light, ephemeral marks render various liminal spaces from references that include water, reflections, maps and landforms. Despite the changing subject matter, methodological observation remains the guiding force in my work. Layering geography, space and time, my work gives the viewer the agency to embrace the liminal and create a desire for the impossible.

In a search of visual consciousness, my work cultivates a tone that fosters the contradictory attitudes that register the absences as well as the presences; working to assimilate

the static and dramatic. As the work accumulates, there is an evident self-construction, a building of inward system comprised of fluid, scratched and sketched marks. This indexical mark has led to a conquest and possession of material, which manifests itself into a seductive organization but rarely in terms of a singular quantifiable gain. My own awareness is concerned with a need to adequately respond to the complexity of a given stimuli.

Meaning *must* be derivable from the interaction of mind with matter or with the material object contemplated, *not* from some transcendent value. This relationship asks us all to extend the possibility of penetrating what is seen, to confront what is decisive. My work challenges viewers to find where they stand between their personal reality and the image of reality. In this exploration, I have turned to mediated references and worked within universally generated substrates to deconstruct our understanding of emblems and image as traditionally presented to us.

Mapping Familiarity

First looking to naturally mediated subjects, I was drawn to the images created on reflected surfaces. I was recording a sense of a specific place through multiple translations, from original to reflection to referent to (typically) painted surface. In expanding my visual catalogue, I began collecting a variety of items that relate to mapping and geography, including textbooks, games and prints. Collecting these references got my interested in investigating the notions of boundaries and territory as they relate to our shared understanding of location and perception. Exploring these themes, I want to understand our shared understanding of place and challenge viewers to question their acceptance of and deference to our views of society. Compressing layers of information, this body of work aims to construct a “real whole.”

In mapping, I find an opportunity for the creator and viewer to identify with forms and territory; to allow the viewer the agency that steams from itinerancy and indefinite permutations. Ultimately, I ask the viewer to truly see the world; to analyze the visual tools we use as crutches in our pursuit of pure observation. The most explicit iteration of this concept appears in *Clifton Heights*, a series of maps I fabricated. This piece starts from a map of personal importance and then branches into the abstract and universal. First making dioramas of no real typography, I then sanitized the handmade effect by scanning the three-dimensional objects into a static image. Subsequently, I placed these creations in the substrate of a traditional road map. Using similar formatting and materials, the resulting product was a set of large scale maps that were then folded down into an easily held format. By printing on cheap paper and producing multiple, these abstractions become very common and accessible for viewers.

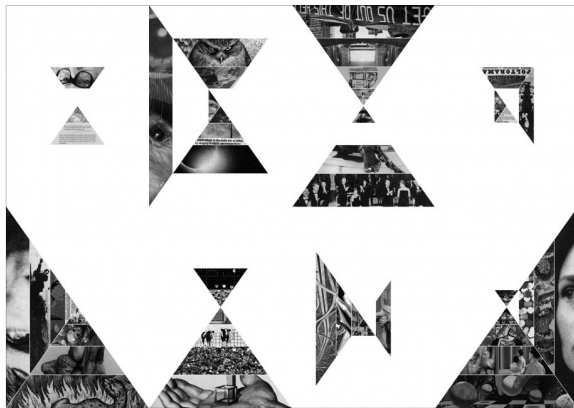


Clifton Heights, 2017, Inkjet print, 34" x 40"

I ask the viewer to complete the piece by unfolding the image before themselves, turning the paper, physically engaging them. This bodily involvement extends the viewer an explicit invitation into my work that extends beyond the maps and into the other pieces I make. The viewer has been primed and now has a more open and attuned eye to look at the more traditional

elements of my work. Now, the viewer can look at my paintings beyond their physical, two-dimensional reality. They are asked to see more, do more with their involvement in my work. Thus, they create their viewing experience throughout the different mediums and formats, synthesizing and concluding ideas for themselves from the clues I have provided. And, eventually, leading the viewer to ask me to provide more.

Berlin-based artist, Jakob Kolding's 2014 piece *How to build a universe that falls apart two days* provides material and conceptual precedent for these roadmaps. The piece consists of eight posters, that were placed in stacks on the gallery floor with an implied invitation for visitors to take them as they please. Some were hung on the wall, illustrating the possible larger pattern that can be created. Within each poster is a unique collage of political, mythological and psychological images, all composed within the same basic geometric structure. This pattern can theoretically continue for eternity in innumerable combinations, with increasing numbers only add to the complexity. Each poster has the same potential for further realization, thus he asks the viewer to initiate the relationships between images. The piece does not take a stable finished form but is realized through multiple correlations. In this vein, my invented maps act simultaneously as an artifact of the original encounter and as an immortal object with boundless opportunities generated from the potential interactions that take place beyond the gallery space.



Left: Jakob Kolding, *How to build a universe that falls apart two days*, 2014, 8 offset posters, 84 x 59.4 cm (each)



Right: Installation view of *How to build a universe that falls apart two days*

Studying the fluctuating realities apparent in the action of mapping requires an examination of the intervals between ideas, images and subjects themselves. In Italo Calvino's writing he artfully constructs visuals through written language that explores the nature of visuals and interpretation. Calvino artfully constructs a model of elegantly abstract musings on spatial and conceptual relationships in his novel *Invisible Cities*. Within the novel, Calvino surveys the relationship between imagination and the human experience through the description of fifty-five fictitious cities. He describes the cities as different, distinct places but in actuality they are actually all descriptions of Venice, which is exposed through dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan.

Polo poignantly reveals, toward the end of the book, that all of these poetic descriptions are ultimately a meditation on his native city. His fluency in his home city informs his observations. His lusting over the conception of place and community beautifully articulate the complications of place that I explore in my work. Namely, he critiques the world as the reader knows it by creating an underlying topographical foundation that produces a "sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort" (Markey 85). Playing with the notion of intervals as transitory space, Calvino designs a system of interlocking structures in his descriptions that facilitates the interpretation of his cosmography. Albert Carter III articulates a model for interpretation of *Invisible Cities* as such: "in interpreting them, we so project ourselves into the realm of emblems to join them. Once we have become emblems, so to speak, we are no longer external to them to 'possess' or interpret them. The emblems are but signs for reality, yet they gain a life of their own, even at the expense of reality" (Carter III 121).

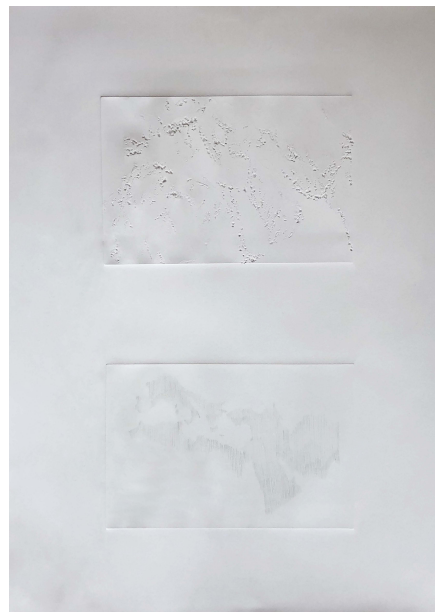
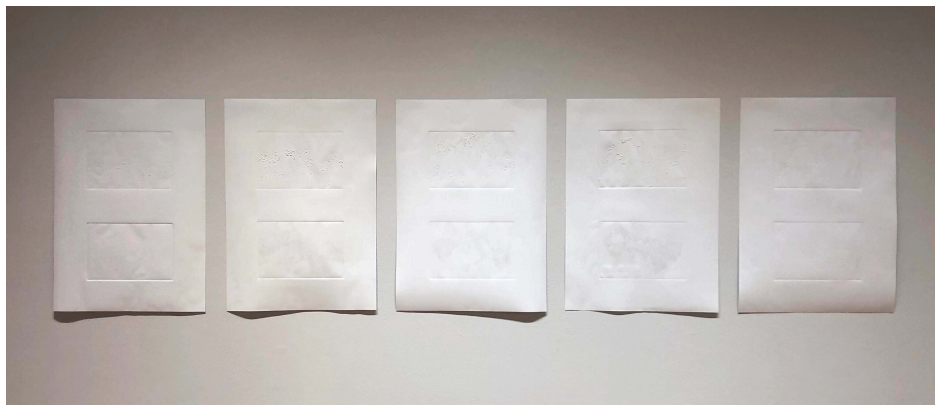
In interpreting the cities, the reader reveals their own inner typography; eventually betraying the individual patterns of desire which shapes our perceptual understandings. Calvino's words resonate because they can only be understood by placing the reader within the actual border of the descriptions themselves, not from the detached vantage of the voyeur. The resulting position is not inward or outward, but among.

Etched Emblems

To further examine the space between signifier and signified, I return to the concept of the map. More specifically, I produced a series of works that stemmed from the illustrations and geographical figures that filled the humanities textbook titled *The History of Western Art and Culture*. Throughout the text, maps are used to symbolically show shifts in borders and culture. I utilize these educational materials as a key to understanding how we conflate our image of reality to a standardized format. This formula sterilizes the relationship between the physical territory and the representation of the territory. Kublai Khan observes this flattening of interpretation in *Invisible Cities* by stating, “*But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused*” (Calvino 22). The map is used as an agent that creates patterns we accept as a universal language for these relationships.

In a series of drawings titled *Invisible Territories*, I aim to destabilize the viewers relationship to the information system presented in the maps from this generic humanities textbook. I separated the two main types of representation employed in these maps: graphic renderings of typography and visual replicas of changing borderlines, into two distinct embossed boxes on the page. In the top box, I etched a reproduction of the typography presented in the original textbook directly into the paper using a stylist. Picking at the paper, I simultaneously

reductively carved into the surface and accumulated the erased materials to build a set of inscriptions that mark the interior of the box. In parallel embossed boxes underneath these etchings, I lightly transferred the shaded region that filled the borders defined in the maps using vertical graphite marks. The resulting fragmentation requires the viewer to integrate the two separate boxes within their mind. However, in both boxes there remains visual elements that so closely resemble the original symbol on the map, say the boot of Italy, that the majority of viewers cannot fully dissociate their educated mind from their previous associations.

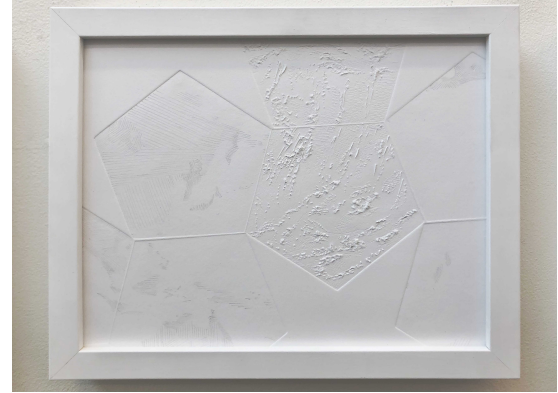
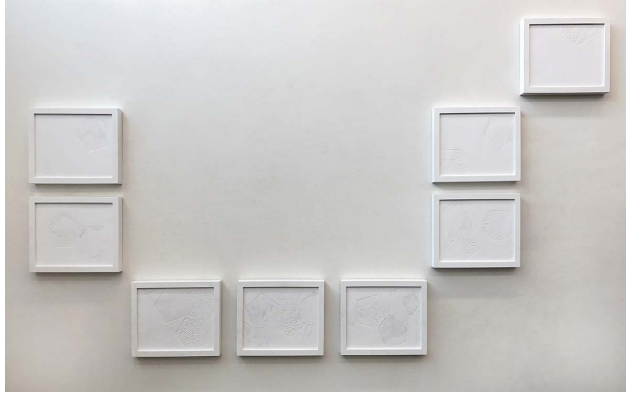


Top: *Invisible Territories: Figure 20.3, Figure 20.1, Figure 2.3, Figure 11.3, Figure 14.1, 2018, graphite on paper, 16" x 22.25"*

Bottom left: *Figure 2.3*; Bottom right: *Figure 14.1*

I continued to use the same scratching and sketching techniques to further explore this mental image integration in a series titled *Global Pursuit*. The reference for the series was an educational board game after the same name produced by National Geographic. In the game, pentagon tiles skinned in four different categories of maps (political, typographical, historical and economic) are used by the players to construct a “complete” world map. The presence of limitless iterations is again present in this constant reorganization of the pieces. In the drawings, I mimic the action of composing these isolated tiles into a unified whole. In both of these series on paper, the sense of being an image on surface rather than surface as image shifts on and off throughout the work. The material reality of their construction, coupled with the underlying content leave this question unresolved.

In *Global Pursuit*, the disparate pieces have to be activated by the player in the game, in the same way the viewer must activate the space between the embossed map emblems. To produce the unified image of the maps and their representations, the viewer must individually engage in the game. From this, the mind can form a “utopia not a city that can be founded by us but that can be found itself in us, build itself brick by brick in our ability to imagine it” (Hume 165). Though the resulting image is not a concrete one, but the practice of harnessing our vision and embracing the multitude of solutions is improved. As with Kolding’s posters, this series capitalizes on the created correlations that occur in the placement of the drawings and the viewer’s activation of them.



Top: *Global Pursuit*, 2018, graphite on paper (set of 8), each 8" x 10"
 Bottom: Detail of *Global Pursuit*

Self-Constructed Territory

In examining these notions of mapping, I find myself inspired by Calvino's call for self-construction, the building of inward civilization. Contemporary precedent is exemplified in Julie Mehretu's paintings. Mehretu creates what she calls the "third space," a categorization of the visual connections between architecture and gesture, in her monumental works. Spanning media, culture and time periods, she has contributed to our understanding of mapping through the layering of images and material. She skillfully navigates the space between representation and abstraction by crafting all-encompassing webs from disparate visual sources. Beginning with a systematic geometric base, she then adds and subtracts until she feels the actions are resolved, then declares it complete. The resulting buildup of marks culminate in an intense, deep sense of atmosphere of urban spaces and networks.



Julie Mehretu, *Insile*, 2013, Ink and Acrylic on Linen, 108" x 144"

Painting provides the medium for immediate translation of individual mark making onto a surface. I exercise emotional restraint by self-creation through the study of sculpted references from various points in the Western canon. By studying and translating these three-dimensional objects onto the canvas, I mimic the conceptual practice of mapping and determining a territory. Relating marks and forms to survey the dimensionality of the form to fit into a static frame, without repressively distorting the referent. This logic establishes the work as a continued study in the development of visual depth that is created from layers of observation, see *A.R. Despair* for reference. I synthesize the mediated reference as a point of inspiration and departure into my own self-construction. Using the framed substrate as a tool to comfort the viewer but also subvert what we are viewing, I continue to challenge myself and the viewer to question our perceptual habits to improve our relation to reality. We must continue to question our own visual consciousness to seamlessly integrate the intervals between logic and whimsy.



A.R. Despair, 2018, oil on canvas, 30" x 30"

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